

Natural Resources and National Security Policy: Sources of Conflict and the U.S. Interest

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Introduction.

Although the revolution in military affairs (RMA) arguably has reduced the importance of territory in the geo-strategic equation, control over territory and access to resources remain a major cause of conflict. For example, the Persian Gulf War largely grew out of Iraq's seizure of Kuwait and its oil fields and Baghdad's ambition to control access to the Gulf's energy resources. Currently, throughout the world, competition for control over--or access to--oil and gas, water, diamonds, timber rights, and other scarce or precious resources is still the stuff of international as well as intra-state conflict. The ongoing violence in Sierra Leone, for instance, is in some part over access to diamonds, exemplifying a conflict arising out of competition for strategic minerals and resources.

The Struggle for Scarce Resources in the Middle East, Transcaspian, and East Asia.

Within this contextual framework, the Strategic Studies Institute (SSI) and the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs (JINSA), in cooperation with the Heritage Foundation, devoted the Third Annual SSI-JINSA conference to examining the competition for natural resources. The focus was on how competition for access to and control of natural resources could affect U.S. and regional security agendas in the Transcaspian, the Middle East, and in East Asia.

A key issue in obtaining access to and gaining or maintaining control over resources is the changing relationship between demand and technological advance. The keynote speaker, James Woolsey, the former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency, observed that ongoing advances in automotive design could lessen the demand for gasoline, thus reducing Western dependence on fossil fuels. Likewise, technological advances in desalinization may lessen Middle Eastern competition for scarce water resources, thereby decreasing the chances for conflict.

For the present, however, political and military conflicts with the potential for having a major impact on the regional security interests of the United States and other nations will continue.

Elsewhere in the Middle East, access to water from streams in Turkey that flow into the Jordan River and Sea of Galilee is a major issue obstructing the peace process between Israel, the Palestinian Authority, and Syria. To the south, the Nile could become a major point of contention between Egypt and Ethiopia.

While 86 percent of the Nile waters originate in Ethiopia, Egypt uses 99 percent of the water supply. Given the ongoing danger of famine in Ethiopia, Addis Ababa could

demand compensation for water usage or might divert a portion of those waters exclusively for Ethiopian use.

Oil and Gas in the Transcaspian.

Another key is the new great game over the former Soviet republics and their huge, and largely unmeasured, energy holdings in the Transcaucasus and Central Asia. Apart from the post-Soviet states themselves, the players include Russia, Turkey, Pakistan, Afghanistan, India, China, Iran, and the United States. The more one observes this region, the more it becomes clear that the great game is only a part of the struggle. The "smaller" players also pursue their own conflicting interests against every other rival in the area, making the southern reaches of the former Soviet Union (FSU) one of the most politically volatile areas of the world.

Apart from energy, the Transcaspian region is home to numerous ethnic conflicts. Additionally, it is a major source of drugs and contains major drug smuggling routes. The United States is particularly interested in smuggling routes throughout the Transcaspian as corridors for moving critical components for weapons of mass destruction, if not actual nuclear weapons, from the vast arsenal of the FSU.

China is also a factor in the competition for resources, particularly in Central Asia. For Beijing, influence in that region is part of a larger strategy to alleviate the growing energy shortages in China. Additionally, the region figures into large Chinese domestic security considerations, given the deepening unrest in Muslim Xinjiang in the northwestern part of the country. China's quest for influence and leverage in Central Asia, therefore, aims to forestall internal uprising and curtail foreign support for them as much as it does to overcoming energy challenges.

For Russia, maintaining and reestablishing control throughout this region is a way of excluding Western rivals from a traditional area of Russian hegemony. Like China, Russia both wants access to resources and seeks to maintain internal security by subduing nationalist uprisings and quenching the fires of ethnic conflict throughout the region.

In short, throughout the Transcaspian and Central Asia, the vital interests of the United States are intertwined with those of Russia and China. Energy access issues, drug and arms smuggling, and the ongoing instability caused by ethnic conflict figure in an increasingly complex and vitally important security equation.

The Asia-Pacific Region.

Similarly, the contest in the South China Sea over the Spratly Islands and its oil resources involves China, Vietnam, Taiwan, and the Philippines, along with other Asian nations. This region also contains maritime trade routes vital to international commerce. Although Taiwan and the Korean peninsula generally are cited as more likely potential flash points for conflict, the rivalry among China, Taiwan, and the many ASEAN claimants to the Spratly Islands has a history of occasionally flaring up into open conflict. Therefore, given the stakes and the players, the Spratlys could prompt difficult security

choices for the United States.

Complicating the potential for a major conflict, the United States has sought expanded military cooperation with the Philippines, one of the states most prominently challenged by China in the Spratlys. Underlying the issue of rivalry over the Spratlys is China's potential rise to regional hegemony. Given what is at stake in the Spratlys and the need to maintain international sea lines of communications, access to resources in the Asia-Pacific Region will play a key role in defining future U.S. security interests.

Conclusion.

Notwithstanding technological revolutions, the importance of geo-strategic control and access to precious natural resources within these territories is, and will remain, a prominent feature of national security agendas in the United States, Russia, China, and other nations. Indeed, the United States has become increasingly aware that the interests tied to control of resources are a vital part of U.S. security. Given the importance of petroleum resources to Asia and the Middle East, the expected leveling off of supplies after 2010, and the abiding importance of water in the Middle East, U.S. security policymakers must remain alert to the strategic implications related to the competition for resources. It is conceivable that, as in the Persian Gulf War, the United States may have to defend its interests and those of its allies and friends in a conflict emerging out of the competition for natural resources. The issues raised in this conference are useful for reminding us that despite globalization, the RMA, and the broader technological revolution of our time, geography and geo-strategic considerations are, and will remain, critical to U.S. security interests.

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